

## Trust and Civic Engagement in the Italian COVID-19 Lockdown

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# *Trust and Civic Engagement in the Italian COVID-19 Lockdown*

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## **Abstract**

The paper presents considerations on the possible consequences associated with the lockdown condition that ensued on the coronavirus pandemic. On the one hand, the infection brought about a notable intensification of primary relationships, in particular within the family and the domestic space in general, while, on the other hand and especially at the start, it generated strong symbolic integration, shown for example by events such as flashmobs and other forms of the grassroots involvement of individuals.

Through empirical research data, we will attempt to understand to what extent the cultural climate prevalent in Italy through March and April influenced the attitudes of the Italians in terms of general interpersonal trust or trust in the institutions, as well as in terms of culture and civic engagement. For this purpose, the paper uses data taken from two empirical research on a sample of about 1,000 cases among the Italian population. It will be compared the evidence resulting from a first survey realized at the end of 2017 and the data collected in a second survey carried out on a sample of the same size (that presents a panel quota of 700 cases) ending on April 30 2020, i.e., at the end of the lockdown period.

The variables to be analysed are relative to general interpersonal trust, trust in the institutions and civic engagement activities.

Such items will function as dependent variables and will be analysed in a diachronic perspective comparing the two panel samples. Furthermore, they will be observed in relation to their distribution throughout Italy, to the age of the interviewees and to their civil status, in an attempt to discover any connection between family life and the attitude towards civil society, keeping in mind the dynamics triggered in everyday life by the pandemic.

Keywords: trust, civic engagement, Italian lockdown.

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## 1. Introduction

Many are the interpretations and reflections, philosophical, sociological and psychological, relative to the period of the coronavirus pandemic and to what consequences it will have within society. Web conferencing and discussion meetings on the topic have also been held in Italy, one on the heels of the other. It is absolutely clear that the various lockdowns which were, and unfortunately continue to be, necessary in various parts of the world, have completely disorganised our social relationships.

With the obligation to remain at home for a long time, private family relations were strongly intensified with consequences that are investigated at theoretical and empirical levels in this issue of the *Italian Sociological Review*<sup>1</sup>. There was a shift from the strong investment outside the home: school, work, free time and sociability<sup>2</sup>, to the exclusive investment on activities carried out within the home and on instruments and techniques that enabled forms of mediation with the outside world. Such a situation brought home to us the extent to which, in many parts of the world, even in the most modernised countries, the family and the relations between family members are still considered a natural resource in which the institutions constantly, and in certain extreme cases exclusively, place their trust, when it is a question of taking care of people's well-being.

Sociologically, we wonder what produced the inversion which single individuals had to carry out on their own investment in their spheres of life within and beyond their own home. Most of the contributions in this special issue of the review are devoted to the analysis of intimate, private relations. This essay, on the other hand, is on the sphere of relations beyond the domestic circle and will investigate the type of attitude of people towards the generalised other, towards public goods and the institutions at the end of the lockdown stage.

The analysis will be carried out using the empirical evidence emerging from two waves of surveys conducted on a sample of individuals from the national population.

Paragraph 2 offers the reader a reflection on certain social events that occurred in Italy during the lockdown. At the end of paragraph 2, the aims of the research are briefly presented. Paragraph 3 outlines the theoretical framework of reference containing the concept of trust, as the main object of

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<sup>1</sup> For further empirical evidence on the Italian case, see also Casfr (2020).

<sup>2</sup> The concept of sociability was introduced into sociology by Georg Simmel (1949) to define those forms of relationship with no particular purpose other than that of coming together for the mutual enjoyment of one another's company.

this research. Paragraph 4 supplies the methodological and technical information that constitutes the perimeter within which the research went forward. Paragraph 5 gives the reader the analysis of the main empirical evidence gathered in the investigation. Paragraph 6 analyses the distribution of trust levels and civic commitment levels among the different categories of population, bearing in mind their proximity to the COVID-19 risk.

## **2. Lockdown and the morphogenesis of primary and secondary social relations**

As already mentioned, the imposition of lockdown modified the equilibrium among primary social relations, community relations and generalised secondary relations. We can say that throughout the approximately two-month period, a substantial part of the Italian population was forced to give up the differentiation between the family and the rationalized organisations (like the firm), which, according to Max Weber (1922), has made up and characterised modern western society, capitalist and industrialised. Many people found, at the lockdown, they had to manage their workload while dealing with preparing meals and running the household generally speaking, as well as looking after the children and supervising their school activities. From the sociological point of view, the sudden lack of such a founding distinction of social life in modern western civilisations, together with the fear of the serious biological risks triggered by the virus, cannot fail to have had an effect on the social attitudes of individuals.

As public opinion beyond the Italian frontiers heard, the Italian population reacted to confinement within the home and to the widespread pandemic of fear by having recourse to sociability, in other ways and through other means (electronic, etc.), and by attempting a collective exorcising of fear through creative events such as flash mobs and symbolic signs of any kind hanging in the windows and on the balconies, or else holding friendship and community evenings organised by means of the widest possible applications of videoconferencing or video-meetings. These were events and episodes which overcame territorial boundaries, making the headlines in numerous other countries both in the west and in the east. They testified to a grassroots solidarity generated by a non-organised civil society as the expression of a kind of community need (Bauman, 2000), something to hold on to in order to confront looming risks and as an appeal to latent forms of social and trust bonds.

Besides this spontaneous phenomenon, other more highly structured forms of solidarity came into being. Experiences of organised solidarity were

set in motion and, in some cases, went in search of the emerging movements towards trust and solidarity. For example, the *Centro di Servizi per il Volontariato della Lombardia* (CSVnet), the Lombardy Volunteer Service Centre: Lombardy was the Italian region worst hit by the virus. The CSVnet announced that more than three thousand volunteers came forward to deal with the health emergency. Padua, the 2020 capital for volunteer work, mobilised 1,600 volunteers to handle the emergency. Each of these testified to the reaction of the Italian citizens to the pandemic event, leading each one to become involved in the more organised spheres of civil society, thus transmitting trust to the so-called intermediate organisations.

One hypothesis is that the risks and fears generated by the pandemic encouraged the Italians; finding themselves face-to-face with an unknown, insidious danger they looked outward in search of forms of reassurance of the most variable nature. This is the hypothesis to be explored, the aim of the research discussed here. For the moment, we can say that almost certainly safety was sought through science. The scientific system during the pandemic won the trust of public opinion, ready to turn on the radio and television channels that broadcast information on how to deal with the disease. Yet at the same time, and in some ways surprisingly, the politicians as well, called upon to make important, distressing choices, turned to science and acknowledged its dependability and credibility, loading – or perhaps off-loading – onto it the responsibility of those same political choices. During the first stage, public opinion appreciated the operation of transferring trust and credibility towards science.

To put it briefly, we can say that initially the public's reaction to the coronavirus was to *look for resources as a basis for their own reassurance* in front of the looming danger. In most cases, we are talking of resources that are symbolical rather than material and economic. Hence, judging by an interpretation of information coming from the media, it seems that the public set their trust in scientific knowledge on the one hand, and, on the other, in social resources such as trust and credibility, cooperation and solidarity, which we could briefly list under concepts such as social credit and social capital. Sociologically, we might conjecture that, faced with concerns for the future, the public set out to search for forms of economic credit (the Marxist material bases of society) on the one hand and symbolical and social credit on the other. Now we have to understand how long such forms of fiduciary investment will last.

### **3. Trust, social credit and civic engagement. The theoretical frame of reference**

The concept of trust enjoys wide coverage in the literature of sociological scientific community. In order to provide the theoretical frame for the work of analysing data, we will pause here on certain general theoretical references and some specific conceptual distinctions regarding the concept itself.

The phenomenological approach to sociology may supply a starting point for our thinking; by that, we do not intend to imply that we are staking a theoretical claim to all the following reflections. We can however agree that the coronavirus has produced a sudden, radical breakdown in the ‘taken for granted world’ (Schutz, 1962) that has been constructed over time by the different spheres of social relations. From one day to the next, the social world on which we depended suddenly altered, and with it, to a certain extent, also the natural and biological environment. Routines we had taken for granted abruptly failed (Garfinkle, 1967). The social dynamics emerging with the lockdown seem to have overturned certain ‘obvious’ socio-psychological thinking, such as Hall’s proxemics theory (1966). Interpersonal distances have been imposed by law on distances, normally graduated, according to Hall, in a measure inversely proportionate to the relational proximity of the people involved. These are measurements relating to the willingness of one person to allow another to access his space bubble, and therefore they also relate to the degree of confidence/trust each person have in other people. At every encounter it has become necessary to wonder what distance should be maintained, how to greet others in everyday ways of interacting. In other words, people have had to reformulate from scratch the meanings of signs traditionally used in interpersonal relationships by translating into practice new rules of indications broadcasted on the mass media by scientists and politicians.

In fact the steps taken to institute the most stringent lockdown and the alert measures following upon the lockdown are, if closely examined, interventions taken on the fiduciary foundations on which a good many of our primary, community and systemic relations are based, and probably taken without full awareness. Some thoughts on the latter are necessary, since interventions that alter trust levels may be fraught with social consequences. As well as being an intrinsic element in any interpersonal relationship, trust is an attitude that carries out an important function in society as a whole. As the neo-functional systems theory of Niklas Luhmann<sup>3</sup> suggests, trust is a powerful mechanism for the fluidisation and acceleration of social dynamics.

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<sup>3</sup> In this case too the citation of the theory does not intend to stake a claim to the epistemological and methodological positions of the research.

Where there is trust there are increased possibilities for experience and action, there is an increase in the complexity of the social system and also in the number of possibilities which can be reconciled with its structure, because trust constitutes a more effective form of complexity reduction (Luhmann, 1979: 8).

The lockdown certainly took place through these mechanisms, reducing the social complexity and the possibilities of experience and action of individuals. It is probably no coincidence that the E.U. it has started a long discussion in an attempt to restart social dynamism and to reopen the possibility of experience and action through the injection of money into the economic system. Indeed, money is another powerful symbolic means of making social relationships fluid, dynamic and reliable, thus increasing the possibilities for experience and action.

On this specific topic, the institutions have not found a way to develop a thoughtful awareness, one reason being that trust dynamics are taken for granted in everyday life and because the institutions were forced to take decisions under the pressure of an emergency. The present contribution intends to observe, and to measure through certain proxy variables, whether it is possible to find modifications in trust levels in Italy at the end of the stringent Italian lockdown, beginning on March 10 2020 and lasting until May 3 2020, for a period of 55 days. Data will be used from the two panel samples interviewed at a distance of some months (November 2017, April 2020) and we will attempt to observe whether, in that time interval, there is evidence of modifications in levels of generalised interpersonal trust and trust in the various types of institutions. Since the global event triggered by the coronavirus happened during that time period, the comparison between the various levels of trust registered in the two surveys will be used as proxies to test the hypothesis of any influence brought about by the social distancing on trust attitudes. It is certainly no more than an explorative investigation, capable merely of formulating hypotheses for further detailed work. In fact modifications in trust levels may have been caused by other boundary variables which we are unable to verify. However, the close proximity of the survey with the closing date of the most stringent lockdown imposed on the Italian population<sup>4</sup> must undoubtedly have had at least some influence on factors such as generalised interpersonal trust or trust in the institutions.

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<sup>4</sup> For a series of general sociological considerations and an account of certain events characterising the outbreak of the pandemic and the start of the most stringent lockdown, see Migliorati (2020). For some critical analysis see also Lévy (2020).

As Uslaner (2002, ch. 2) observes, two types of trust can be distinguished, one strategic and one moral. Strategic trust is what the individual places in other individuals on the basis of specific relational experiences. It is the trust based on expectations of a rational type and it uses empirical verification to decide whether to trust that other person. In social science circles, it is the type of trust studied through collective action theories and the game theory (van Witteloostuijn 2003). It presupposes an attitude of the suspension of trust, and of risk calculation understood as the rational-instrumental form of guide to action driven by cognitive expectations (Luhmann, 1972). Moral trust for Uslaner is an unconditional attitude, generalised rather than addressing specific people. It is the trust that we place in our fellow beings in general, almost a sort of prerequisite for social relations. It is the type of trust that more than any other allows our social relations to become dynamic and fluid, multiplying the scope of experience and action of which we have already spoken. It is empirically studied by the social sciences, operationalising it as 'generalised interpersonal trust', long investigated through theoretical and empirical research. It is on this last concept that part of the empirical analyses of the present work will be based, while we leave specific (strategic) interpersonal trust in the background. For a long time the social sciences have been musing on what contexts socialise the individual towards generalised trust. A number of theoreticians (Almond, Verba, 1963; Putnam, 1993; 2000) hold that it is the experience of social relations in the organisations of civil society (associations and the other organised non-profit forms) that develops a generalised attitude of trust in individuals towards other individuals. Certain empirical research data show higher levels of generalised trust among people belonging to such organisations. Other scholars (Rothstein, Stolle, 2003; 2008; Rothstein, Uslaner, 2005; Stolle, 1998; 2001) maintain that it is the good working of the public institutions<sup>5</sup> to generate trust attitudes towards other members of society in general. Other research works (Stolle, 2003) reveal a correlation among family life experiences and generalised trust. Variables such as associative experiences, civil status and family conditions will be taken into consideration in the analyses that follow in order to control the influence of family life on trust. A further scientific precaution must be remembered: that suggested by those (Bjørnskov, 2006) who query the 'direction' of the causation process, believing that generalised trust, rather than being a dependent variable, may be considered as an independent variable which perhaps influences variables such as the good

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<sup>5</sup> By the good working of public institutions we mean the actions of those service organisations (therefore not political parties or organisations safeguarding specific interests) which operate more in direct contact with the public, pursuing aims of equality and impartiality of treatment and sending out an image of reliability.

functioning of institutions, belonging to an association, the development of democracy and the economic system itself.

In the pages that follow we discuss the data relative to modifications in trust levels, generalised and institutional, found at the end of the stringent Italian lockdown stage.

#### **4. Empirical research**

The analysis will be carried out using the empirical evidence emerging from the two waves of surveys on a sample of individuals from the national population. The first survey was in 2017, from November 16-21, on a sample of 1,000 cases, to whom a CAWI (computer assisted web interview) system questionnaire was administered. The survey was carried out by the Italian research organisation Swg, which has at its disposal a panel of approximately 60,000 registered names, profiled by the research company reproducing the stratification of the national population according to the main socio-demographic variables (sex, age, macro-geographic area of residence). Using the random method, the sample for the first survey was extracted from this set. The second survey was conducted from April 24-30 2020 and finished only a few days before the end of the lockdown stage caused by COVID-19. Out of the 1,000 interviewees involved in the first stage, 724 (i.e., 71.6%) responded to the second survey. To this sample panel, 287 cases were added as replacements (fresh sample) in order to achieve the same territorial distribution according to age and sex as the sample for the first survey.

The two waves of the research were designed by a group of researchers from the Universities of Verona and Padua. As well as the present author, Anna Maria Meneghini (University of Verona), Massimo Santinello (University of Padua) and Marta Gaboardi (University of Padua) were involved. The two sets cannot be properly considered in the strictest sense as probabilistic samples with respect to the Italian population. However, the online sample, having been randomly extracted, is statistically representative of the set of 60,000 respondents profiled by Swg<sup>6</sup>.

Data on generalised interpersonal trust will be compared and set in relation to another type of trust, trust in the institutions. As in the case of interpersonal trust, we will explore the variation in the levels of the mean values of trust in different social institutions, in the hypothesis that the incidence of social confinement imposed by the political institutions may have had an effect on

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<sup>6</sup> On the methodology of investigations via web see Callegaro et al. (2015). In particular, on the methods for online sampling and on the representativeness of the samples extracted from a profiled panel, see paras. 2.2 and 5.2 in the same work.

any variations. Furthermore, we will check whether there are any correlations between institutional trust and the interviewee's data profile, as well as the level of correlation between interpersonal generalised trust and trust in institutions<sup>7</sup>. Institutional trust is measured by means of a synthetic index, constructed by summing a battery of answers to the question: 'On a scale from 0 to 10 where 0 is not at all and 10 is a great deal, can you say how much trust you place in: a) public institutions; b) private businesses; c) religious institutions; d) non-profit organizations; e) political parties; f) trade unions'. The scores obtained were added together and the total was divided by the number of institutions, arriving at a synthetic index that varies from 0 to 10.

A further variable to be analysed and set in relation with the concept of trust is civic engagement. In this case too, the concept is measured through a synthetic index constructed by summing the positive answers to various types of civic engagement conduct: 'In this last year, have you happened to: a) sign a public petition or a signature collection; b) take part in a meeting to discuss issues regarding your community, district or area of residence; c) contribute to fund raising for social solidarity and charity purposes; d) intervene on political questions in a newsgroup/chat-line/ mailing list'.

In order to facilitate the analysis, and in particular the comparison between the two waves of survey, the variables relative to generalised interpersonal trust, trust in institutions, civic engagement, interest in politics (which are continuous or interval numerical variables) have been re-codified in ordinal variables in three levels: high, medium and low<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> In their recent essay, Belardinelli and Gili (2020) offer a theoretical reflection on the forms of trust and the possible influence exerted by COVID-19. As well as the forms mentioned here and empirically analysed: 1) specific interpersonal trust, 2) generalised interpersonal trust and 3) institutional trust, the two authors also recall systemic trust, that is the form of institutional trust which, instead of addressing specific institutions such as politics, the church, political parties, non-profit organisations etc., considers the institutional sphere in a generalised way. This substantially refers to the trust that each citizen places in the functioning of the social system overall. Such as, for example, trust in the functioning of the road system, traffic signals, or trust in the adequate maintenance of public transport, and so on. Naturally the experience of the health emergency has highlighted this social dimension as well, yet we can say that stringent confinement has in a certain way made this dimension less relevant and it will not be analysed in this work, partly through lack of indicators due to the present paper being planned before the publication of the two sociologists' article.

<sup>8</sup> For technical reasons, it was not possible to have a single data matrix containing the variables of the two survey waves. In the analysis of cross-references given it is not possible to calculate significance indices. However, through Microsoft's Excel application was carried out an ANOVA of the variables found in the two researches

## 5. Modifications in levels of trust and civic engagement in Italy at the end of the lockdown

First of all, let us look at the modifications of generalised interpersonal trust measured in the two waves of survey. At the end of the lockdown, the level of such trust had risen with respect to the survey of two years earlier. In particular, as we can see in Table 1, 33.5% of the interviewees was at the high level of the trust index in 2020 against 25.2% in 2017<sup>9</sup>. We may make the hypothesis that that confinement period turns out to be a variable that influenced and contributed to increase generalised interpersonal trust<sup>10</sup>. Required to keep the social distance and to stay at home, it would seem (paradoxically?) that trust in the generalised other increased. The instruction to maintain a distance might generate a sort of fear of the stranger, experienced as a potential source of infection. Instead the data seem to deny such an outlook and point towards the hypothesis that confinement produced the opposite effect. A hypothesis corroborated by theoretical considerations as well. In fact, during the first stage of the pandemic, voices were raised on the part of intellectuals, men of culture and spiritual figures underlining the fact that the illness highlighted a common, universal belonging of individuals to humankind. The coronavirus put us all in the same boat. The Slovak philosopher and sociologist Slavoj Žižek, in his pamphlet on the virus (2020) quotes Martin Luther King who thus summarised citizens from various ethnic backgrounds being part of American society: «We may have all come on different ships, but we're in the same boat now»; the philosopher advances the hypothesis that the virus may produce generalised solidarity. Furthermore, he suggests that physical distancing may lay the foundations for a 'more authentic access to the other'. As an atheist, Žižek quotes the '*noli mi tangere*' of the Christian scriptures to clarify this opinion of his. With a different attitude towards the Christian scriptures and enjoying a greater share of public opinion, Pope Francis has also used the metaphor of the boat on which humanity finds itself. He did so on the occasion of the global prayer for the end of the pandemic. Tossed by the storm, the boat with the disciples is used as an icon of vulnerability and of the common

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and was calculated the F value. Each of the analyses done produced an index of significance  $p < 0.001$ .

<sup>9</sup> In terms of average value, the value of 5.9 in 2017 passed to 6.4 in 2020. With a value of F equal to 24.00 and a significance test value of  $p < 0.001$ .

<sup>10</sup> Some observers have noted that during this period, among the topics debated in Italian public opinion, the immigration issue appeared to have totally vanished. Immigration no longer seemed to be a problem. This piece of information, should it be confirmed empirically, might be associated to an attitude of greater generalised interpersonal trust that developed during lockdown.

condition of humanity. The theme of vulnerability as the common cypher of humanity has been recalled, in recent years, by the social sciences as the platform on which to rest the development scenarios of human societies. Belardinelli (2007), for example, holds that, rather than being characterised by the figure of *homo sapiens* or *homo faber*, humanity finds its distinctive features in *homo patiens*. On the same subject, see – among others – the works of authors such as Nussbaum (2001), Cavarero (2007), Ehrenberg (2010).

TABLE 1. *Levels of trust, civic engagement and interest in politics in the 2017 and 2020 surveys.*

	Levels	2020		2017	
		%	n	%	n
Generalised interpersonal trust	Low	29.8		38.7	
	Medium	36.7	1011	36.1	1000
	High	33.5		25.2	
Trust in institutions	Low	40.2		29.8	
	Medium	27.3	1011	27.1	1000
	High	32.5		43.1	
Civic engagement	Low	31.9		51.2	
	Medium	31.6	1011	24.7	1000
	High	36.5		24.1	
Interest in politics	Low	40.4		37.5	
	Medium	38.0	1011	29.3	1000
	High	21.7		33.2	

The empirical data on generalised interpersonal trust at the end of the lockdown seems to support this hypothesis, as does another empirical support if we analyse the index of civic engagement and the hours devoted to gratuitous activities for the benefit of other people (not family members, relatives or friends) as revealed in the two surveys. For these two variables we find an increase in the values with the passage from the 2017 survey to that of 2020. Specifically, the 5.52 hours of 2017 pass to 8.19 hours in 2020 devoted to gratuitous activities benefiting non-family members and non-relatives. Furthermore, we see an increase in those found at the high level of the civic engagement index, passing from a value of 24.1% in 2017 to 36.5% in 2020<sup>11</sup>. As the break-down analysis in Table 2 confirms, this increase is explained by the consistent increase in 2020 of activities such as joining in fund raising (+12.7%) which was strongly encouraged by the media during confinement. Yet, with similar and greater percentages, other types of behaviour also increase such as participating in meetings for the discussion of community problems (+15%) or signing public petitions or the collection of signatures (+8.2%) and

<sup>11</sup> The mean value of such an index, in a range from 0 a 10, passes from 3.9 in 2017 to 4.6 in 2020, with a value of F equal to 26.02 and a significance of  $p < 0.001$ .

intervention on political questions within chats, newsgroups etc. The set of data on civic behaviour and trust attitudes confirms the idea that the stay-at-home period encouraged a positive outlook of the Italians towards other individuals.

There is however a different approach regarding trust in the institutions. In this case there is a clear reduction of those positioned at the high level of the index; they go from 43.1% in 2017 to 32.5% in 2020, showing a general loss of trust in all the institutions, with no great difference one from another<sup>12</sup>.

TABLE 2. *Civic modes of conduct and 'short' solidarity.*

	2020		2017	
	%	n	%	n
In the last year, have you happened to:				
Sign a public petition or a collection of signatures?	55.9	1011	47.7	1000
Take part in a meeting to discuss issues regarding your community, district or area of residence?	37.4	1011	32.4	1000
Contribute to fund-raising for social solidarity purposes and charity?	57.9	1011	45.2	1000
Intervene on political issues in the ambit of newsgroups/chat-lines/ mailing lists?	34.6	1011	31.0	1000
	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.
Hours devoted to gratuitous activity for the benefit of others in the last month	8.19	15.82	5.52	20.58

As Table 3 shows, presenting data relative to the degree of trust in the diverse institutions that go to make up the synthetic index, the Third Sector is the ambit which enjoys the greatest trust on the part of public opinion, followed by businesses and by the Church; at the bottom of the list, as often happens, are the political parties and trade unions. The classification does not change passing from 2017 to 2020. Certainly, this information showing the Third Sector as the most reliable institution among them all is highly relevant and corroborates the theories on its existence (Hansmann, 1987). However, what deserves mention here is that, over the period analysed, the mean of trust values decreased in all the institutions under examination, without exception, even those best considered such as the non-profit organisations.

In fact, it seems that increased risk and isolation has meant that the relevance of the institutional dimensions has diminished while the basic trust in other people in general, considered as individuals, has risen. The generalised other, less frequently met when confined at home, has seen an increase in reliability, while the institutions, on which the media kept us informed,

<sup>12</sup> In this case the mean value of the index of institutional trust went from 4.2 in 2017 to 3.9 in 2020, with  $F = 13.67$  and  $p < 0.001$ .

underwent a drop in their consensus. They are judged to be less reliable in confronting the risks and subjective difficulties coming to the fore due to individual vulnerability towards contagion. This impression of the lower reliability of the institutions seems to be confirmed also by the information relative to interest in politics, whose mean values fell in the time interval from 2017 to 2020, going from 33.2% to 21.7% in the high level of the index.

TABLE 3. *Analysis of the variance of variables relative to trust in the institutions in 2017 and 2020.*

	2020			2017			F
	Mean	Var.nce	n	Mean	Var.nce	n	
Trust in public bodies (0-10)	<b>4.38</b>	5.30	1011	<b>4.48</b>	6.43	1000	0,81
Trust in businesses (0-10)	<b>4.42</b>	4.64	1011	<b>5.00</b>	5.00	1000	30.15***
Trust in the Church (0-10)	<b>4.20</b>	7.2	1011	<b>4.68</b>	7.65	1000	15.48***
Trust in the third sector (0-10)	<b>4.96</b>	5.78	1011	<b>5.49</b>	6.3	1000	20.44***
Trust in political parties (0-10)	<b>2.51</b>	5.8	1011	<b>2.58</b>	6.73	1000	0.43
Trust in trade unions (0-10)	<b>2.82</b>	6.56	1011	<b>3.00</b>	7.11	1000	2.18

\*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

Observing the variables in relation one to the others (analysis of correlations in Table 4) we see that, with Pearson's  $r$  value of 0.463, interpersonal generalised trust is strongly and significantly correlated to trust in institutions. In theory, this does not surprise us as we are dealing with two forms of trust that refer to each other. However, it is striking that this happens even if in the second wave of survey, confronted with an increase in interpersonal trust we find a reduction in institutional trust, which seems to go separate ways from the path of a reciprocal association. The other variables also present positive correlations, especially those between interest in politics and civic engagement (0.343), to which are added those with trust in institutions (0.257) and generalised trust (0.255). The correlation is less strong between civic engagement and forms of trust (institutional 0.209, generalised 0.173). All values presented change little if the same analysis is carried out on the sample from the first survey.

Lastly, it is worth noticing the type of correlation existing between the number of associations to which the interviewees belong and the correlation with levels of trust and civic engagement. Observing the data in the two different findings, we see first of all that there is no change in the average number of associations to which the interviewees declare they belong. The

figure goes from 0.98 in 2017 to 0.99 in 2020. But if we correlate this figure with the other variables so far analysed, we see that belonging to an association has a higher  $r$  value in the case of the civic engagement index (0.204<sup>\*\*\*</sup>) and less than 0.200 in the case of institutional trust (0.183<sup>\*\*\*</sup>) and of generalised interpersonal trust (0.168<sup>\*\*\*</sup>). This means that the association experience may function as a socialisation agency above all towards civic engagement conduct, rather than towards trust attitudes. The data on the socialisation function of associationism towards the dimensions of the social capital require further empirical confirmation which, as we already said, the literature does not as yet contain. However, it is important to notice how the lockdown context probably saw the associations carry out a socialisation role towards civic engagement, given that in the 2020 survey the  $r$  value rose to (0.357<sup>\*\*\*</sup>), while the  $r$  values relative to generalised and institutional trust remained more or less the same.

TABLE 4. Correlations between indices of trust, civic engagement and interest in politics.

		Generalised interpersonal trust	Trust in institutions	Civic engagement	Interest in politics
Generalised interpersonal trust	Pearson's $r$ Sig. n				
Trust in institutions	Pearson's $r$ Sig. n	0.463 $p < 0.001$ 1011			
Civic engagement	Pearson's $r$ Sig. n	0.173 $p < 0.001$ 1011	0.209 $p < 0.001$ 1011		0.257 $p < 0.01$ 1011
Interest in politics	Pearson's $r$ Sig. n	0.255 $p < 0.05$ 1011	0.257 $p < 0.01$ 1011	0.343 $p < 0.001$ 1011	-
Association membership numbers in 2017 (mean 0.98)	Pearson's $r$ Sig. n	0.168 $p < 0.05$ 1000	0.183 $p < 0.01$ 1000	0.204 $p < 0.001$ 1000	-
Association membership numbers in 2020 (mean 0.99)	Pearson's $r$ Sig. n	0.143 $p < 0.05$ 1011	0.184 $p < 0.01$ 1011	0.357 $p < 0.001$ 1011	-

## 6. Distribution of levels of trust and civic engagement in categories of the Italian population

Let us now see which of the interviewees best explain the phenomenon of the increase in general interpersonal trust.

### **6.1 Social-demographic features of the interviewees**

Here we present the result of a series of crosstabulations carried out for the variable of the generalised interpersonal trust level with the variables of the interviewees' profiles<sup>13</sup>. We will examine only the crosstabulations that pass the significance test and supply information on the features of those interviewees who achieve higher percentages in the high level of trust. The interviewees for whom the interpersonal trust level is highest are males living in medium-sized towns (with populations of between 100 thousand and 250 thousand), living with a partner, with a high level of religious practice, and with a high monthly income (more than four thousand euros).

We will proceed in the same way regarding trust in institutions; however, since we find a drop in that type of trust, we observe the features of those who are present to a greater degree in the low level of the index. Having low levels of institutional trust are mainly the residents in the North-West; probably the fact that the epicentre of the infection was in Lombardy played a very important role in explaining that result. Furthermore, presenting a mainly low level of institutional trust are those with a low level of religious practice or unbelievers, and those who have a low income (less than two thousand euros per month).

Lastly, we observe the features of those with a high level of civic engagement. They are mainly male, with high educational qualifications, strong religious practice or unbelievers, and an income of over 4 thousand euros.

### **6.2 Level of 'proximity' to the COVID-19 risk**

After carrying out this first identikit of the population, we analyse the type of experience the interviewees had with the coronavirus. We are assisted by the variables presented in Table 5, from which we see that one fifth of the interviewees had been in quarantine and 13.8% had a loved one diagnosed with COVID-19.

Through the same questions in Table 5 is presented a dichotomous variable that was constructed of the subjective experience or perception of proximity to COVID-19, from which we see (Table 6) that 65.2% of the interviewees had no subjective experience or perception of being exposed to or in proximity of the coronavirus, while the respective 34.8% had some experience or performed some act that refers to a contact with the coronavirus (asking the doctor for information, going to A&E, doing the tampon, having an acquaintance affected by COVID-19, etc.).

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<sup>13</sup> The tables with the results of the analyses would require too much space, therefore they have not been included in the text.

It is interesting to note that whoever answered yes to each question in Table 5 possesses greater generalised interpersonal and institutional trust, and presents a higher level of civic engagement than whoever answered no. The exception is the case of the mean of the generalised interpersonal trust degree of whomever had to undergo the experience of quarantine. Therefore, it seems that having a closer relation to risk or to the event of the infection itself increased trust, both generalised interpersonal trust and institutional trust, and also the tendency to civic engagement. However, the data we possess in this regard cannot be statistically generalised to the universe of reference seeing that several cases do not pass the test of statistical significance. Only the variable of civic engagement passes the significance test, in all the crosstabulations with all the variables of the closer relation with the infection, and therefore such data can be statistically generalised. It is again interesting to see that, as regards the sample in question, simply having to undergo the experience of isolation in quarantine reduced interpersonal trust and, in part, institutional trust. This appears reasonable, since having to stay at a rigidly determined distance from others may well affect the general sense of trust. Yet the phenomenon of lockdown did not produce the same reaction, indeed showing an increase in generalised interpersonal trust. In Table 6 we show a more concise reading of the analysis presented here.

*TABLE 5. Experiences relating to contagion and trust levels.*

	%	n
Consulted the doctor because suffering one or more influenza symptoms	12.4	
Went to A&E because suffering one or more influenza symptoms	3.8	
Was in quarantine	22.2	1011
Had a swab test to check for presence of coronavirus	4.7	
Was diagnosed as having coronavirus	2.5	
A person close to interviewee was diagnosed as having coronavirus	13.8	

*TABLE 6. Experiences relating to contagion and trust levels.*

			Interpers. trust		Trust in institutions		Civic engagement	
	%	n	Media	S.D.	Media	S.D.	Media	S.D.
No experience or contact with COVID-19	<b>65.2</b>		<b>6.38</b>	2.36	<b>3.78</b>	1.84	<b>4.24</b>	3.26
Experiences or acts that reveal contact or direct fear of contact with contagion	<b>34.8</b>	1011	<b>6.61</b>	2.46	<b>4.09</b>	1.78	<b>5.40</b>	3.07

## 7. Conclusions

At the end of the data analysis we can in fact say that the pandemic phenomenon and the lockdown season, which had such an impact on the daily life of Italians in the period between March and May 2020, also produced certain effects on the wider spectrum of sociality in general.

In particular, at the end of the lockdown an increase was visible in generalised interpersonal trust with respect to a previous survey of November 2017. This confirms what has been theoretically presumed by several parties: the fact that the common condition of danger in which individuals found themselves acted as a generating mechanism for a social solidarity attitude that might explain the events emerging among the population: the many flash mobs and the acts of solidarity such as volunteering and donations to public institutions, particularly to health institutions. An increase in civic behaviour is also shown in the civic engagement index elaborated in our investigation and by the increase in the hours devoted gratuitously to the benefit of others. In the lockdown stage, according to the data, social associationism may have played an important role in stimulating behaviour tending towards interpersonal assistance and civic engagement.

Furthermore, the fact emerges from the data that those who experienced a closer proximity to the contagion in terms of personal risk or acquaintance with infected people show higher levels in all three indicators examined in this work (generalised interpersonal trust, trust in institutions and civic engagement).

The question is different regarding trust in the institutions: in this case the interval between the two surveys shows a reduction in institutional trust. The reduction of the trust level is generalised, since it involves all the institutions without distinction, starting from the non-profit bodies which enjoy the greatest level of trust, down to the political parties which are to be found in the lowest level of the classificatio.

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